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Terrorist targets sit in state's rail yards

Chemical-laden cars vulnerable to attack

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Rail tanker cars are the silent heroes of New Jersey's vigorous chemical industry.

These black steel cylinders deliver the fuel, ammonia, chlorine and other ingredients used to create products in plants from the banks of the Delaware River to the shoulders of the New Jersey Turnpike.

But lawmakers and security experts are becoming increasingly worried that they provide something else -- a profound, ever-present threat to the people who live in and around New Jersey.

A ruptured tanker could create a cloud of toxic gas lethal enough to liquefy the lungs of people up to 25 miles away, according to government filings.

Those records also show that six of the 10 worst conceivable accidents at New Jersey chemical plants involve 90-ton rail tankers of chlorine exploding at their facilities. To get to the plants, the tanker cars traverse a spider web of largely unguarded rail lines that weave through the state's densely packed residential areas.

On any given day, they can be seen sitting for miles beside the Turnpike, a stone's throw from passing motorists.

Politicians, activists and security experts are focusing more intently on the threat posed by these tanker cars and trying to determine if there is a way to prevent a determined terrorist from turning one into a weapon of mass destruction.

Current regulations do little to prevent that, many critics say.

"Anybody driving by with a shoulder-fired missile can take off on a chlorine (car)," said Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.), who is pushing for stricter regulations. "It makes no sense."

Sen. Joseph Biden Jr., (D-Del.), has introduced a chemical-transport bill that would force companies to reroute dangerous rail tanker cars away from places terrorists are likely to target. It also requires the federal

government to research how cars can be made less vulnerable. The measure has stalled in Congress.

A tour up and down one of New Jersey's "chemical alleys" -- the industrial area that roughly stretches from the Bayway Refinery in Linden up through the northern sections of Port Newark -- reveals a stark vulnerability.

A Star-Ledger reporter and photographer last week found easy access points to tanker cars. At one end of Bayway Avenue in Elizabeth, for example, the only security at an open fence leading directly to tankers was a few "No Trespassing" signs. Trembly Point Road in Carteret crossed the Turnpike and freight tracks, providing a clear line of sight to nearby trains below on the tracks. In many places, little more than a guardrail, trees and brush are deterrents.

Hazmat signs and universal chemical-identification numbers on the sides of the tanker cars -- designed to tip off first-responders to chemical threats in case of a fire or other emergency -- also provide a handy guide to the contents of the cars.

Union County Sheriff Ralph Froelich said he occasionally sees graffiti marring the rail tanker cars. Those scrawlings evoke fears far more troubling than a vandal's can of spray paint, he said.

"The Turnpike is so easy to ride and stop. Some type of projectile is not out of reach," Froelich said. "Hell, I could throw a rock and hit some of the rail cars."

Rick Hind, a toxics expert for Greenpeace, said one frightening scenario could involve a terrorist climbing onto a car and detonating a homemade explosive.

"Something like that is going off in Iraq every day," he said.

"Our recommendation would be that they explore -- and this is in Biden's rail safety bill -- other kinds of shipping methods," Hind said. "We just accept that a 90-ton rail car should be rolling through people's communities."

Rail industry representatives contend the alternatives are limited.

Conrail says rerouting rail cars is not possible and there is nowhere else to park them. A security plan is in place, according to the company, which declines to offer specifics.

"Our track infrastructure is really pretty utilized -- be it for storage or moving freight," said John Enright, a Conrail spokesman. "The obvious question is, where would you put (the cars)?"

Conrail has fenced in certain spots and uses railroad police with Norfolk Southern and CSX Transportation Inc. to help protect and patrol the freight lines, Enright said.

"Of course, we don't fence our whole network," he said. "That wouldn't be cost-effective."

Initially driven by the 9/11 attacks, concerns over freight and passenger rail security have intensified nationally after the London Underground bombings that killed more than 50 people this month. In a chillingly

related scenario July 16 in Iraq, a suicide bomber detonated explosives that blew up a gas tanker truck, killing more than 90 people.

Corzine said he is particularly worried about the rail tanker cars containing chlorine that serve a major bleach manufacturing plant in South Kearny near the Pulaski Skyway. He wants Conrail, which owns the tracks along the Turnpike, to "stop parking them next to the Turnpike and on overpasses. That, to me, is unacceptable."

Corzine, who has introduced legislation to improve both rail and chemical plant security, said he does not favor rerouting because it might hurt New Jersey communities that derive tax revenues from industries along the Turnpike.

The federal government already has begun taking some steps.

U.S. Transportation Security Administration officials created a \$10 million pilot program along a seven-mile rail corridor through Washington to assess ways to lessen risks of a terrorist attack.

TSA officials also are working with railroads and local representatives to improve fencing and install video monitors and intrusion detectors while increasing security patrols. The agency, however, does not favor a blanket prohibition on rail tanker cars in highly populated areas.

"We always have rerouting as a tactical measure we can use when appropriate ... when we're aware of a threat or a potential threat," TSA spokesman Mark Hatfield said. But, he added, the agency is responsible for "taking into consideration the needs of commerce and the free movement of goods and people."

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